Under the Fennel

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Under the Fennel

by nowsaguaro

Summary

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Will has tasted this before.

The morning that Hannibal brings him his protein scramble, Will Graham recognizes the meat in the sausage.

{{ both killers, Will realizes early on, courtship, no sad story lines }}

Partial Silhoutte

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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There is a taste down under the cumin, under the fennel and paprika. A vegetal, dull flavor not often found in sausage meat. Even if this protein scramble were boosted with the grassier, fibrous beef rather than the customary fatty pork, it wouldn't account for the way the sausage splits so finely and easily on Will's canines.

He pushes it around his mouth, as though different regions of his tongue and teeth will recognize it more definitively.

More memorable than the monotone of human flesh is the chew of it – or lack thereof – and Will could bring to mind again the sensation of its tearable, pullable buttery fibers any moment he likes, despite the years now separating him and one curious evening.

It's a massive leap, and Will is not about to accuse a stranger of cannibalism, even if the stranger raises other flags. Even if the doctor wears charm like a snugly fitted pathology: too familiar too soon, too macabre even for their morbid context, attracted to both the psychiatric and criminal fields. So aware of his own aesthetic appeal that it borders on manipulation.

There is something very off about Hannibal Lecter, but Will won't extrapolate from oddness to human flesh consumption.

Not yet. Not without further evidence.

After breakfast, Will gets up from the table and moves over to where his duffel lay on the floor, tugging off his white t-shirt to fumble around for a collared shirt. He hardly thinks of the eyes on him, which pairs well with the way the other man hardly hides his lingering

looks. This version of the man forgot the person he was pretending to be when he entered the room 20 minutes ago, who turned his back while Will pulled pants on. Unapologetic but forays into performing timidity. The both of them.

[Is this what intellectual caution feels like between the dangerous?]

Something else moving in human motions. *[Something that tends to get what it wants.]*

Will can't help but gaze back, at least a small flicking glance to confirm the hunger.

That was human – the crumbles of juicy spiced meat he scooped up and chased around the plate to not let any go to waste – was person. He's got someone else in his belly.

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Walking around full on person did not remain the focus of the day once he saw to the orphaning of a teenager.

"I wish the day could have gone differently," Hannibal says, when they get back to Will's motel room. "But his terror is over."

"Actually, doctor, I'd say his terror endures." There are mourning families and a traumatized teen in emergency surgery – oh – and blood of the father is still clumped in Will's arm hairs. "I need new glasses," he remarks.

"Certainly a terror, depending on how customized your lenses are," the other man quips back, naked intrigue flashing across his face.

"The two thoughts weren't related." He feels the need to back track over his comparably trivial train of thought. Wouldn't do to seem bored by being marked a murderer. Will

probably too hastily adds, “Not sure how far back in time we’d have to go to prevent the lasting terror.”

Hannibal brings Will over to the kitchenette’s sink. Both of them have begun the process of removing the scene from their bodies, but haven’t gotten very far. Will doesn’t ask why the doctor is back in Will’s room and not his own. Either he sees him as pathetic and pitiful, or something ever-interesting to keep an eye on. Perhaps the older man should see this as a pivotal moment as well. Maybe he hasn’t gathered that yet. Either way, the doctor is deriving some form of power from spending the afternoon doting on Will.

Hence his scrubbing fingers kneading into the meat of the profiler’s palm right now. The folds in Will’s hand held onto the Hobbs girl’s blood, so much so that it looks as though crimson could be his skin color, with some areas painted in beige. Hannibal works up his forearm with the dish soap and creates a pink, foamy lather on his skin.

They couldn’t wash up at the sinks in the Hobbs house, so made due with moist towelettes from a responding officer’s takeout containers.

Will can’t pinpoint why he’s shaking. Adrenaline from the kill always gets him, but usually in a rush of warmth rather than this icy gut feeling. There’s guilt there, too. Today did not have to go this way: two bodies and someone on an operating table for probably five more hours. Why teenage girls? Abigail Hobbs worked every day for her survival – but who is to say those girls did not?

Abigail Hobbs spent almost 18 years pretending not to see something life-destroying despite all the hyper-vigilance that comes with being a girl. No way is she guiltless, but no way should she be hung for those crimes. Surely – if she wakes up – the severed throat and seized property will send home a karmic message.

After some time, Will shuffles numbly over to his bag while the doctor scrubs his own hands in the sink. The trash can beside the counter is topped with a pyramid of pink paper towels and the other man’s jacket hangs on a chair at the dining table.

Will breaks the silence again, feeling bolder than usual. “Do you only specialize in breakfast foods or do you have some dinner recipes as well?” He pulls on a buttoned flannel like it’s a t-shirt.

Hannibal dries his hands and inspects them before answering with a smirk, “I specialize in fine dining.”

“Especially meats?” Will tries. Definitely still coursing with adrenaline, otherwise he’d have filtered… what might be perceived by a fly on the wall to be a death wish. Feels more like the early stages of a courting ritual.

[The first move in a mating dance.]

The other man stares, frozen, while offering a quiet, “yes.” His eyes that were locked on Will’s now search his face from across the eight feet that separate them. The man is observant of human emotion in a practiced, mathematical way more than the way one learns to gauge expressions after a lifetime of socialization.

Hannibal is silhouetted by the kitchenette’s window and the younger man can feel his own blue eyes alight with the beams of the inappropriately sunny afternoon streaming onto his form. He knows he must look like a gift in this lighting now.

He feels beautiful, being witnessed by a tall shadow.

The silhouette speaks again to ask, “do you feel good, Will?”

He doesn’t know what to say here. Implying someone else’s behavior is a tension best soothed by admitting one’s own. But should he turn this conversation from hints to frankness?

He sure wants to.

“I feel powerful,” he admits. Maybe his adrenaline crash disguised the fact, but he does have that life jolt – of feeling like he belongs in holy books. The awareness that taking of life is keeping of life.

[Expanding one's dominion.]

The doctor walks toward Will, the light from the window now glinting off his hair, curving around his cheekbones. His approach casts the younger man in shadows, too. " You *are* powerful. Do not forget you are an animal. You have nothing to repent for."

Will shivers under a distant sensation: as though he's being seen from an angle even he's not privy to. The way it feels to be photographed from behind.

An animal. He feels them circling each other, no enclosure, no humans watching. Just two beasts encountering one another in the wild. This man with a passion for the finer things in life, for wool suits and instrumental music, exists as the leading option on Earth for Will.

If there wasn't a mortal tension and paralyzing lack of trust, then he would be shedding relieved tears. Hannibal must sense it, too. The way it is to walk by a reflection for the first time – while remembering that Narcissus drowned for his mirrored self.

The doctor doesn't wait for a response, adding, "shall we pack? I presume there is no need for our efforts now that burial arrangements are being made for our perp."

Will can't help but crack a smile at the way the other's mouth forms the word 'perp'. He always chooses his language like he's two people at once. "Yeah," Will croaks out, "I will, uh, call admin to arrange a flight."

"Lovely," Hannibal says, "just lovely."

The profiler feels the topic change like a breeze - from flight arrangements and back to him. His adrenaline prickles at his fingers again, just there in his hands and his chest, begging him to *grab* at something.

As his life stands, his network of acquaintances, his career, his cover, are carefully planted, yes, but still untended and under loose soil. Oh God, he needs this. Kicks of energy twitch his jaw while he asks, "how about I come up to your room in 10 minutes and we can check out together?"

“Yes, come up to room 204 in 10 minutes. I’ll be ready,” the doctor says with a smirk.

Will nearly rolls his eyes. It’s irksome that the older man knows so well the effect he has on people. That he seems to toss around flirtation this easily to someone he barely knows.

[I want to become your only interest. And you are working very hard to become mine.]

“Careful when you head back out into the daylight, doctor,” Will says softly to Hannibal’s departing back. When the other’s head turns with a questioning look over his shoulder, Will follows up: “I can see the blood on your hands even with my curtains drawn.”

Watching the other’s eyes, it’s as though he watches a fish go willingly to pierce its lip on his bait hook. Only - it’s the tether the fish wants, not the bait. Will is rewarded with a pleased smile that stretches goofily across the older man’s severe features. It might have been sinister if it wasn’t so thrilling.

In the 10 minutes he’s left alone to pack and tie off (and double-bag) the bloody trash, Will takes more than just physical inventory.

This week he met a man, this one made entirely of appetite, who crowds him with a simple look. Danger can’t be far behind, but what is vulnerable? What is really at stake?

To that point, though, there is danger in loss, danger in letting their sense of each other fizzle away quietly into the unmentioned past. Because there is something potentially lose-able in Will’s life now and he, well, doesn’t want to lose it.

[Then don’t fuck this up.]

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Hannibal makes intentional eye contact while he places his leather bag in the overhead compartment, and Will flashes him a knowing smile.

As the doctor settles in the aisle seat beside him, Will asks cheekily, "did you have any openings this week?"

The other man suppresses a smirk and turns his head toward him elegantly, looking down at the space between them. "At my office or at my table?"

Will puffs out a laugh through his nose and replies, "I don't imagine you're short on dinner guests."

"Well, business is good, so I'm not after patients either." Hannibal pauses for effect, then adds, "just after your company."

The younger man nods slowly and tries to hide his smug smile. "Dinner it is, then."

"Any preference on the meat?" Hannibal dares. Out in the open but under a shroud.

"I'll eat whatever you serve me." Will looks over through his dark eyelashes, finally daring to catch the gaze of the doctor.

Truth hangs between them, heavy and silent like its own gravity. It’s there, ever present, unremarked upon in a way that makes it tight on their necks.

Chapter End Notes

This is just going to be a simple and few chapter work - I will also be posting a post-fall Christmas one soon <3

Red Wine

Chapter Notes

> a shorter chapter before a meaty one because I had writer's block and wanted to produce something before the end of the year <3 so this is flirtation and small realizations before the next

“Have you ever been to the Mediterranean sea?”

[Likely a thought jogged suddenly by my decor.] “Haven’t had the opportunity, no.” Will stares around his first floor to try to remember what he was about to do before Hannibal stopped by. He doesn’t want to ask why the man thought he would need help getting to his home later this evening, but there also seem to be ulterior motives behind the drop in.

Hannibal busies himself with some unknown task in the kitchen that involves cabinet opening. *[Emergency snooping session?]* His voice is only slightly forced when he crouches and continues, “I believe you’d enjoy summers there. The waters are wild and blue in a way I think you’d like.”

Will briefly daydreams that it was commentary on his appearance, but he’s not quite that vain. “I’ve heard stories of its merciless sinkings, yes.”

Hannibal stands gracefully. “A beautiful sea does not somehow owe more mercy than a polluted bay.”

Will smirks toward his feet at the thought, briefly reminded of the Chesapeake Ripper and his dirty namesake. “Something beautiful is afforded a longer period of doubts for its danger and a shorter road to forgiveness for its bad behavior.”

“I imagine you have quite a bit of experience with that,” Hannibal shoots back with a warm dazzle in his eyes.

Will’s brain short circuits for a moment. “What?”

“The people in your life are all criminal psychologists or analysts, are they not?” Hannibal closes the last cabinets he’d opened and continues, “they place their trust, their pleas for help in your hands time and time again despite who you are without witnesses. You can’t believe that blind spot is uninfluenced by your beauty.”

Will scoffs, feeling itchy and hot under the scrutiny. “What about my own talent in anticipating and subverting forensic measures? For naught?”

That response gets a quick eyebrow raise and pursed lips. “Forgive me. You are aware of your own brilliance so I assumed complimenting your mind was going to be an overly expected avenue for flirtation. I was attempting to…”

“Anticipate and subvert?” Will leans against the counter and crosses his arms. He smiles wide, certain of his magnetic quality when he allows himself some gentleness.

Hannibal quips, “a skill I also pride myself on.”

“Well, doc, I’m sure you are very aware of all of your charms, so I’m short on compliments, too,” Will says toward the tile floor.

Hannibal seems overwhelmingly pleased by the assessment, and doesn’t miss a beat. “Even when a compliment is not a surprise, it can still be lovely.”

Will remembers. He was going to shave for tonight. Now it’s too late to make an inconspicuous aesthetic effort for their meeting, and he mentally curses the other man’s preference for arriving unannounced. At least this time Will had pants on.

The next silent dilemma that he faces is how much food he should set out for his dogs. No polite way to ask if he should bet on returning home tonight. He’s reading the tone correctly, but he is truly unaware of the other’s general intentions.

[Is he old-fashioned? A hedonist? Is he smooth under his clothes like a Ken Doll? It’s still a coin toss for this one.]

Will does pay attention to one thing: his house feels weird with other people in it. Looks odd, cluttered, erratic. Things make sense when he's alone, when there's not a strange man taking inventory of his house like a culinary repo man.

Skating his eyes around the room again, Will looks at the lure on his work table and something synthesizes in the back of his brain.

[Hobbs made his own lures, too. Shaped like a girl. And a work table shaped like a family.]

Hannibal approaches Will, interrupting his thoughts. "We should go shopping before our evening. I am missing a few things and so are you."

Will laughs, all thoughts of Hobbs stowed away in the back of his mind. "How would you know what I'm missing? You don't even know what I eat."

"I think it would be better for everyone if you had a few more staples on hand. Although, I am pleasantly surprised by your spice collection," Hannibal says before taking a seat.

A hint that he's allowing time for Will to change and primp (like he'd planned to but now he wants to rebel). Will takes his clothes to the bathroom, making extended eye contact with Hannibal before closing the door. He ends up shaving. The edge of his beard is clean and sharp – and there are no more little hairs that threaten a unibrow.

He has a bottle of Acqua di Giò that his neighbor gave him. She'd splurged on an expensive cologne for her husband's birthday right before he kicked. So, Will is going to spritz himself with a dead man's hand-me-down citrus musk. He catches his own eyes in the mirror when he sprays it on his bare chest. Apparently, he'd arrived at some conclusion unconsciously about the trajectory of their evening.

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Being driven around on errands by Hannibal Lecter is surreal to say the least. The price tags on the foods make Will shudder to the point that he starts avoiding reading anything at all.

Best to just let the other man have the wheel, he already has it.

“Dr. Lecter,” comes a voice from down the wine aisle.

Hannibal tenses slightly and his previously placid smile suddenly looks a little more difficult to keep on. “Hello.”

“Shopping for a party?” The man asks, eyes trailing over their full basket with a theatrically impressed expression.

Will steps forward into the conversation, sensing he was about to be beckoned. This territorial move isn’t necessary for a simple conversation with a normal acquaintance – and Will’s not even sure he cares if Hannibal is uncomfortable – but this stranger seems deluded and overly familiar in a way that is getting on the nerves of even passersby in the store.

“Franklin, this is my good friend.”

No name. No embellished language to stomp out a crush. Just enough information and vagaries to establish that Hannibal has a life separate from this man. *[Attached patient.]*

Will raises a hand to do a subtle wave. The fractures moving across Franklin’s eyes and mouth are excruciating for a layperson to watch.

[You blow out the candle of the man with clinical expertise. You want your patient to improve as much as you want to wound him.]

[An intellectual sadist. Evading pathology.]

[What kind of killer are you?]

[What kind of person are you?]

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When they're finally through with errands and the lengthy drive to Baltimore, Will grabs two of the three cloth bags from Hannibal's trunk and waits politely at the stoop steps. He's rewarded with a flirtatious glance while the other shuts and locks the car door, and flits through the keys on his key ring.

It's absurdly human to the point that Will wonders just how many men are trapped under the other's veil.

Hannibal's house is oddly… evocative. Figures that the man could find art and knick knacks that cohesively allude to Ancient Greek morality, Christianity, death, and sex while still not standing out as some wealthy eccentric bachelor decor. No. It's sensual and vampiric in a subtle way that suits the Hannibal he's coming to know.

Will spots a framed charcoal of a saint he doesn't recognize. "I didn't think you were the type to feel indebted to theological traditions. Or is it for the art of it all?"

Hannibal pivots on his heel as he puts away their grocery haul item by item. "Something about the human condition, or rather what it means to be human, is classified by its openness to the divine."

"A lot of people, when they say 'the divine,' they refer to the worldly and the human," Will quips.

"What do you believe I mean when I say it?" Hannibal asks, his voice full of unhidden curiosity.

[Huh. What do you believe in when there is no art for it?]

Will pulls a few items out of the cloth bags and places them on the butcher block for convenience, making a show of thinking. "The ugliness of – or the poeticized appeal of – monotheism."

Hannibal takes his coat off his shoulders with skimming fingers and, in a way that's playful enough it doesn't feel like a subject change, he asks, "may I get you something to drink?"

Dinner is pasta with a sauce made with crumbles of something dead. The wine tastes vegetal – again, that familiar base note – but with a glare of fermentation to hide that it holds a thing that once bled.

"Jack Crawford is a brilliant man, if unyielding at times." The doctor gingerly severs a bundle of noodles with the side of his fork.

"Is that why you're manipulating him?" Will asks, watching Hannibal's eyebrows twitch up while he lifts the fork to his lips, and clarifies, "I mean, you puppeteer everyone you come across, but is that why you're manipulating *Jack* ?"

Hannibal pauses to respond. "I have not yet decided what I will do with Uncle Jack. Until recently, I thought he posed the biggest threat in the area." He lets his lips drag on the tines, conscious of his rapt audience.

[Threats. Why have we only now approached the topic?] [You want to see how central taking lives is to my world. Because it is central to yours.]

"I don't pose a threat to you."

Hannibal swallows his bite and sets down his fork, leaning in closer to say, "perhaps not in the way I first imagined, but I'm certain you do."

It's said confidently but with an odd air of self-deprecation.

Will tries not to mumble when he asks, "in what way could I hurt you if I have no plans to… violate your privacy?"

At least the other man genuinely smiles at the euphemistic alternative to the *'see you get the needle for your crimes'*. "Your existence and the fact of our shared philosophy are enough to disrupt my life in unpredictable ways." Hannibal reaches for his wine glass before adding, "I hardly think knowing you could leave anyone the same."

If Will lets this man tear through his life in the way he clearly wants to, the list of things that he stands to lose is not so long; maybe he's been waiting for something to unroot him. (To pull him from the earth, raining soil, and garden him out of public view.)

Will thinks of his solitary life of silent car rides interrupted only by the infinite twisting of social discomfort. Where every relationship brings with it the sensation of wearing the wrong sized clothes. Hannibal terrifies him. But, then, so does everything. *[Who are you?]*

[And I am endlessly tired of my daily vertigo.]

He tries to pass off the spike in anxiety as a scoff. Will breathes out, "I hope you like unpredictability and disruption."

Hannibal smirks. "I haven't dealt with either in quite some time. But I find it breathtaking to behold."

And Will has the distinct and visceral feeling of being beheld. The one where embers crackle and glow in his chest.

He's sent home with groceries and the promise to cook together again. A hand on the side of his face and soft well wishes. It's not quite enough. And that's by design.

[To keep us sleepless. To keep us craving.]

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Beside Fires

Chapter Notes

> i'm feeling very gay cornball so here is the macabre fluff I've written to polish this off. thank you for reading. Have a great new year and, if you like fanart, I do that too :) (tumblr @archivegeo)

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"I've recently met what will kill me," Will says, not expecting a reply. Buster trots off toward the kitchen, leaving him alone.

It’s been just two days since he saw Hannibal last, but they’ve already made plans to see each other again tonight.

Will feels the need to sweep the house for something the other man might have left in his snooping. He’s accepted that, even if this is a genuine start to a relationship, they’ll be on a chessboard. Moves and countermoves. And there’s no early out.

He selects a black shirt that never quite fit the tone of dates or funerals he’s been invited to. It’s stiff as ever, folding around his physique and under his jacket as though he stole it from someone else. But he looks good. So it really doesn’t matter.

There’s less of a question this evening. He sets out an extra helping of rosemary beef for his dogs and texts his early riser neighbor, Lydia. He’ll invest in a dog walker if evenings in a different city become a regular thing, but Will lies to himself and says he doesn’t know yet.

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"So you're blackmailing a retired psychologist into being your therapist."

[Any power over anyone is a sort of blackmail, right?]

Hannibal doesn’t smile, but something about his placid facial expression gives away that he enjoys Will’s boldness. Hannibal responds, "my doctor is philosophically an anthropologist. She gets plenty out of our arrangement." He moves over to where he’d left the bottle of Chateau Margaux 1787 to breathe beside their untouched crostini and brie.

"Like content for research she can't publish or fuel for a book she can't write?" Will asks playfully, then crooks a curious eyebrow. "What do you tell her about me?" He accepts the offered glass and tries to remember to pace himself on these old grapes.

The other man sits across from him – a matching maroon arm chair by the fireplace in the keeping room – somewhere in the bowels of his winding first floor. He considers for a moment, sniffing his drink in thought. "An approximation of the relevant facts. Just that I've met someone and that we have much in common."

Will sniffs the glass, too. Smells expensive, but he’s out of his depths trying to glean any more information than that from the scent. He probably even cheated that answer from his current opulent surroundings. "You meet with a shrink every week to give her an approximation of the relevant facts?"

"Are you attempting to tease me into revealing what I tell Dr. du Maurier?" Again, *pleased.*

Will laughs and gives a faux confused face before answering, "yes."

"You're forgetting that I don't yet know your secrets," Hannibal says, before taking a sip from his wine.

"Kinda the point. I'll show you mine if you show me yours," Will flirts, his face partially obscured by his wide glass as he drinks. It tastes old. In the Jane Austen sense more than hints of rot, but he keeps his comments to himself regardless. Banter is going well enough and he shouldn’t cloud that success by fumbling through odd compliments.

Will doesn't want to admit that, aside from whether or not he's been named and criminally accused to this du Maurier person, he is curious to know what Hannibal says about him… in general. What he likes about him, where he sees this going.

[It's a vain thing. Falling for someone. Hoping you might obsess over me. Bring my name up casually to strangers. Wonder what I think of the clothes you have on.]

But Hannibal would bleed out before showing his hand directly.

The pleasant consequence of two people choosing to only say just enough is frequent bouts of silence. Just the crackling fireplace and the slurp of wine amplified in their deep glasses.

Eventually, Hannibal speaks. "Stepping through a gallery, there is a sort of incomparable euphoria I experience. Despite the fragmentary nature of the more minimalist exhibits, it's overtaking."

[An unfinished thought?] Trying to keep this conversation going but not grasping the direction, Will offers, "the minimalist museum architects plan for overtaking pieces."

Hannibal nods. "There is a moment of appreciation, brief or lingering, before the curious human mind has to lean in close and search for brush strokes. Even on our most poetic day, we become analytical." He uncrosses his legs and leans forward on his elbows, pitching down to a deep tone. "And with certain works, we might feel the need to touch… to confirm that it truly was painted, stroke by stroke."

The tips of their shoes touch on the emerald rug.

"With you, Will, I am privileged enough to get to see you for the whole, though–" Hannibal pauses and squints as though he needs a better look at Will to finish the thought, "you're so complex, so without learnable patterns or singular thought, it is difficult to make sense of your beauty being constructed, too, of the same particles as other men."

And what does he say to that? There's no outrunning this type of seduction, especially not now that, when faced with it, he realizes even the most fearful parts of him reach for Hannibal. Yearn to get tangled in his spiderweb. Beg to get caught in his maw.

Will looks into his drink for any clues for what to say. He doesn't find one. Luckily, the man across from him gives him sprinkled chances to retreat and resurface, with their conversations tending to be molasses slow and precise with intention.

[The eroticism of calculated speech.]

He eventually responds, "I have been thinking for days that… you feel a lot more like something that's happening to me than a person I've met." Will laughs at himself, then sets down his wine glass and stands in the small space between their arm chairs. After a deep breath so his voice doesn't catch, he adds, "and you can touch me, you know. To feel for the brush strokes."

As much as Hannibal seems to enjoy the upper hand that his calm attitude affords him daily, he doesn't wait a second before standing and placing his glass on the mantle. The man moves over to Will and takes his hand – lightly, by the fingers – and pulls them up against his face.

Rather than kiss his knuckles, Hannibal drags Will's curled fingers along his lips and over his cheek. Guiding a caress as though he'd never get one.

When his hand is freed, Will lets it run through Hannibal's hair, down to his neck, and around the line of skin hidden by the shadow of his collar.

Painting on him: a standing invitation to be adored for rare honesty.

Will feels the swish swish of a sliding hand over the starchy fabric of his back while a different hand pulls at the muscle and fat on the back of his neck. He tries not to think of lion

cubs, of being held between teeth. He notices his eyes are closed – have been for the near minute they've stood here, embracing – and he opens them.

Hannibal is already watching him, rapt, and Will feels distinctly beautiful again. Aware of how he must've looked, breathing through his nose, trying not to think of den animals.

Empathizing with the gaze of someone hungry. Empathizing with the gaze of an admirer. Will recognizes that awe, feels it too and not just mirrored. He can taste the other's breath in the space between their mouths, its heat already warming his lips. Will braves eye contact before leaning in, unable to look away from Hannibal, even after amber eyes flutter closed.

His lips are as soft as they look, cared for meticulously. Not bitten enough. His mouth and skin are warm – not reptilian like Will nearly expected. (In the part of the mind we leave cracked open for the supernatural and unexplained.) No, Hannibal is human flesh, strung together of corded muscles, the physique that conquered the thing on their dinner plate, the thing made of all the same parts.

Being mouth to mouth with another killer is shakingly human. Uneasily romantic. Like being married in a graveyard.

Will feels his hand being extricated from Hannibal's hair, and before he has the chance to feel embarrassed, he's being guided in a half-suggestion toward the stairs. 18 oak steps between here and a new sort of relationship.

He follows.

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"So, you've seen my work. Have I seen yours?" Hannibal asks, once they're showered and back under clean bedding.

Will huffs at the ceiling and rolls onto his side to face him. "I doubt it. You're so sure I've seen yours?"

"Would I recognize you in it if I did?" Hannibal asks, then casually, as though the second question hardly matters, responds, "and yes, I'm sure you have."

Contemplating the confidence, the subreality of this moment, Will skates his fingers up and down the other's arm. "I couldn't say. If you'd recognize me in it, I mean. But we have signatures even if we try hard to keep ourselves out of it."

Hannibal drags him closer by his hips, also tugging the thick duvet further up their bodies to settle for sleep. He mutters, "the patterns we return to, the ones we can't resist. Hallmarks of our design." The late hour is starting to show on his face.

"We show our hand," Will whispers back.

[Expression does that. Adrenaline does that. Just look at the dental print on my shoulder.]

And, so, in this hidden world and hushed voices, with the social liability insurance from their taboo relationship, Will recounts aloud his chain of bodies. From the bayou and the Blue Ridge Mountains, to dips into urban parks and suburban marriages.

There is a much more tangible power that comes from rocking a small town than the power that might come from blending artistic kills into the relative chaos of densely populated areas.

“Higher risk, louder impact where the hub of life is a chapel,” he explains. Even if his bedmate is a multinational trauma-resilient independent killer, urban is what he knows. Will has quite a bit of his own storytelling fodder.

And his grand tour echoes his childhood stomping grounds like a postcard collection, but no one looks for the overlap, “no one asks me the right questions.” Will’s public persona is constructed entirely of meek body language and the sticky, everlasting assumptions of others. Shadowed hiding spots behind the cover of pathetics.

The electricity under their moving fingertips now feels so uniquely alive, becoming aware that everything else was foreplay before this revelation.

To the unasked rebound question, Hannibal answers, “I admire paintings and Gods. Some might say I laugh in the face of both.”

“Your work is misconstrued as narcissism or God delusion?” Will’s so close to placing it, the identity of a killer scratching, scratching at the back of his brain.

“I like to think, perhaps arrogantly, that I create a new genre with inspirations from all through the grooves of history. I fall victim to trope of course. A bitten nose. A severed tongue of the powerful.”

[Oh.]

Will feels his chest dive into an acidic, foaming combination of pride and terror. The thrill of celebrity, of long acquaintance from a distance. Being a muse or a pawn – either way, what it is to be something special to… something special.

His roaming hands stutter, then go from their soft fingers to sliding palms. “Oh.”

Hannibal exhales slowly through his nose, but doesn’t let the topic die. “As you can assemble fractions of my portfolio, might I take a stab at yours?”

A startled laugh bubbles out of the younger man at the double entendre, and he nods.

Hannibal hums and tries, “four years ago, a woman was found in a Biloxi swamp, her stomach full of endemic beetles. Mummy-wrapped in clear tarp and still wearing her mother’s locket.” He smiles as he realizes his suspicions were correct. “I wonder what she could have done to the righteous to receive such a cocktail of wrath and mercy.”

Will swallows. The same waves of awe and terror crashing and crashing against his bones until they turn to sand. “I hope I’m less visible to others.”

“Just to me, I suppose.” Hannibal pulls Will until his chin is hooked over his shoulder and their arms are fully wrapped around the other. “We’ve known each other, faceless, for a while,” he sleepily mutters, “I know you in retrospect.”

[What a statement to drift off with.]

—_- –_-

In the morning, Will is awake first. Shocking, but it would suit the profile if the other man has trained himself to be partially nocturnal.

[So hedonistic he’d hardly miss the chance for a slow morning in bed, even if his discipline keeps him busy at night.]

Will sees it starting, something creeping on the horizon like a red sunrise: he, Will Graham, might soon love despite himself. Despite the world and the list of reasons screaming out that he shouldn’t, he’ll love.

Maybe one day that will feel good rather than sickening. Maybe allowing yourself to love is like letting out a long cry after a terrible week, indulgent – mundane, even – but so, so good.

As their time together stands, Hannibal has been additive to his life. Including in this moment and its sweetness- when his breaths pull his shoulder up so slightly before letting it fall down much harder. It's early love dressed in strange clothes.

The man stirs, takes a sudden inhale and peels open his eyes slowly. After a quick scan of the fraction of Will's body extended out above the sheet, Hannibal smiles. A small tooth pokes out and Will is weak for it.

Will smiles back, feeling warm and hungry.

In the kitchen, Hannibal uses a science lab sourced from abroad to extract their coffee and, miraculously, Will still finds the moment charming. Something fries behind him on the stove.

"I prefer the press to the drip. It's more rewarding when one works harder for their treats," Hannibal quips, pursing his lips.

Will accepts the offered cup and is left alone to try it when Hannibal returns to his cooking. The coffee is so strong and bright he feels his pH shift.

Will catches the other man smiling to himself in the distorted reflections of the oven's stainless steel and the glass of his meat fridge. A smile he schools when he turns around again.

"I would love you," Hannibal pivots fully and places two plates of eggs and bacon on the counter, "on my arm tonight at the opera."

It's opium, hearing the words intentionally catch. Will is almost convinced this entire house is an endless poppy field and, only when he gets far away enough, he might shake this dopey feeling. For now, he's warm all over and tucking into breakfast proteins.

Drugged into wakefulness by the ability to deal in whole truths.

[Not the same as knowing the way a lover does the dishes or whether they run late or whether they call their mom on birthdays. But it's knowledge all the same.]

It's Will's first tangible chance at something sustainable, and he could guess it's Hannibal's first as well. Because no relationship dependent on a central lie can have a real future.

It is written and unchangeable. He can run his thoughts forward in their book together – to read ahead – but he can't turn back at all. He can't rewrite his life now without this half-stranger.

[So maybe in this unpeeling future, I say yes to opera invites.]

"Uh, sure," Will smiles, feeling the scrambled eggs in his cheeks move around while he speaks. "What should I wear?"

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